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Dr Grace

Educational Philosophy

Going into my sophomore year of high school, I was still lost as to what I wanted to do with my life. I thought perhaps I wouldn’t even go to college and become a carpenter like my dad. By the end of my sophomore year, thanks to easily my two favorite high school teachers, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. Thanks to Mr Burns and Mr Toohey, who co-taught a World History and English class for two periods (called Humex), I knew I wanted to be a teacher. A lot of this was because I wanted to be just like them. It was that year that I really realized that teachers weren’t just robots that lived at school, that they were people too who cared about their students very much and wanted the very best for them. I realized what a difference they had made on my life, and decided I wanted to try and make the same difference in other kids lives someday.

What’s really awesome now is learning about all of these different teaching strategies, and thinking back to Burns and Toohey and realizing that they used most of these tools. For example, I remember in EDU 101 learning about the different types of co-teaching and realized that Burns and Toohey used pretty much all of them! I also have realized that the reason they had such a great influence on all their students was because they made it so clear that they cared about us. They were so understanding of our personal needs and they understood Maslow’s hierarchy (in fact they taught us it!). I remember at the beginning of the year we took all kinds of personality tests and learner tests, and now I realize they were collecting data on us to use for the entire year! They used our personalities and learning styles to build their lesson plans to fit our needs! We did so many fun activities in that class and were constantly engaged and moving around the room. It was during these activities that made me realize that lecturing constantly is terrible and that I wanted to be a teacher so I could make school interesting and engaging for kids.

Now like I said, after my sophomore year I knew that I wanted to be a teacher, but I loved English and Social Studies and wasn’t sure which content area I would rather pursue. Then my Junior year I had American History with Mr Long. It was after this class that I realized I wanted to be a history teacher. Mr Long is also the teacher that I got a lot of my specific philosophies on teaching history from. That reason is because a lot of history teachers just tell you what happened a long long time ago, make you memorize this information, and then test you on that information. When you take classes like that, you leave the class at the end of the year wondering what the point of that class was. What did I learn in that class that’s going to help me later on in life? Walking out of Mr Long’s class at the end of that year yielded no such feeling! What I loved about that class was that he cared less about dates, numbers, and nitty gritty details, and worried more about the impacts of these significant events. He challenged us to question decisions made by people in power, to assert how these events changed the course of history, and ultimately, how these events connect back to and impact our lives today. Mr Long cared less about you being able to tell him the dates and small details of the Civil Rights Movement, and cared more about you being able to tell him the overarching themes, the major events and how they drove the movement, and of course what the lasting impacts of the movement do we still see today. What challenges do we still face today that weren’t solved during the civil rights movement? And what knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement can we take and apply to the world today to solve problems that we still face? I also took a civics class with Mr Long my senior year and my favorite project was looking at the 2012 presidential election. I remember we had to write a ten page paper that asked us to look back at 2012 election and recall who we had rooted for. We then had to do in depth research on each presidential candidate and write about who we actually would have supported had we done our research in 2012. We had to talk about our own political beliefs and what we held true, and then compare that with the information we had gathered to see which candidate we lined up with the best. What this research paper taught me was that people cannot make uninformed decisions on anything in life. We have to decide what we want from something, and then do intense research to see which option is the best for our beliefs. This project taught us how to defend our positions, and how to argue for what we believe to be right, which I think was an awesome lesson.

Basically to summarize my views on teaching history, Mr Long hits it right on the head! I remember talking to the kids that were taking AP History that year and they were talking about how they had to memorize every president and what dates they served. I just remember thinking how much wasted time that was, because I mean in the long run, you probably aren’t going to remember that, and even if you do, what help is that ever going to be in your life? Mr Long taught us not to memorize, but to critically think for ourselves and come to our own conclusions based on the evidence at hand. For example, it’s a very popular believe by Americans that Abraham Lincoln was a great president. Instead of teaching us that though and filling our heads with information he wanted us to know, he gave us resources such as primary documents for us to use to make our own decisions about Abraham Lincoln and he helped us sharpen our skills to be able to make these decisions. As it turns out as a class we discovered that while Abraham Lincoln obviously did some great things, he was not perfect by any means and did some highly questionable things as well. This was all information we would not get from a textbook or from a teacher that simply taught us what the textbook wants us to know. Activities like the ones I’ve mentioned taught me that not everything in history is as black and white as it seems, and that just because someone tells us something is true (even a teacher) doesn’t mean it necessarily is, and we need to do our own digging and research and formulate our own opinions. That is a life long lesson that extends far beyond just history that I will forever be thankful to him for.

In looking at my approach as a teacher, there are several different philosophies when it comes to teaching. The philosophy that best lines up with my beliefs is Pragmatism. The Pragmatism approach looks at the changing reality and at the world as it is now. In history, you would want to relate historical events, people, etc to the present. The point of history is knowing what worked and what didn’t work in the past, so using Pragmatism would involve relating events from the past to what is going on in our world right now. Then, using this knowledge, attempting to come to a solution to the problems we face now.

These philosophies can be broken down even further into 8 sub philosophies of teaching. The two sub philosophies that fit my teaching philosophy the best are Constructivism and Reconstructionism. Constructivism involves a lot of hands on work for the students and a lot of critical thinking for the students. Student do a lot of questioning in this philosophy, especially questioning their understandings or beliefs. A lot of this happens with class activities where students get the opportunity to share out to the class. The Reconstructionsim philosophy deals a lot with the world around the students. It looks a lot at current social issues and what some potential solutions may be. Students are really encourage to work on their problem solving skills in Reconstructionism.

One of my favorite quotes of all time is by George Santyana who says “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” I just think that’s such an important lesson to learn in life because we always have to be learning from mistakes. Sometimes they are little things that you are learning from yourself. Other times however they are very big national problems. As American citizens we get the right to vote, so it is all of our responsibilities to be as well educated on each matter that we vote on as possible. Sometimes being educated on a matter involves understanding other matters throughout history that were very similar. If we understand what worked and what didn’t work in the past, hopefully we can make better decisions in the future. Hopefully if more teachers across the country start using that approach, we will overall have more educated voters, and hopefully higher voter turnouts.

A teaching approach that really lines up with my teaching philosophy is the approach that my team presented on in class which is integrated curriculum. I really love this approach because it gets students working on the same topic in all of their core classes, but each class is looking at that topic through a different lense. I really hope to be hired by a school that does something similar to this because I think this approach is a great way to get students engaged in the classroom, as well as in real world issues. In my history classes as part of an integrated curriculum, we would be looking a lot at the history of the topic, and how we can take that history and make it useful to solving the problems that topic faces today. For example if our topic was Africa, we would be looking at conflicts and other events that Africa has gone through in the past. We also though would be looking at current social issues in Africa and we would try and relate the past to the present issues. I feel like this would really get students engaged when they are actually trying to solve a real world problem, when they are actually doing something that is applicable to the present world.

I remember in Mr Long’s civics class we did a big group project where each group picked a social issue we faced in our local community. We had to do a bunch of research, and from this research we had to propose a solution to the problem. We then went for a whole day to the state house in Augusta and actually proposed our ideas to our legislators. I think projects like these are absolutely awesome because it gets students actually looking at problems around them and critically thinking about them. It also opened my eyes to the ability we have as citizens to make our voices heard and to be able to actually enact positive change around us. Not to mention that it is an incredibly engaging project!

My motivation to be a teacher really comes from my love of kids and my love of teaching people new things. Something new that I’ve added to that since I’ve been at college is to be able to help kids that really need it. To be there for kids that are struggling in their home lives, who don’t have a lot of support. I recognize that on some days, the biggest thing some students may need is just to have someone be nice to them and feel like someone cares about them. I really hope to be able to do that for my students.

Honestly my biggest fear is that I can’t reach kids, that there’s going to be kids that I can’t help. I don’t mean to sound cocky, but I know history well and I’m very good with students, so being a good “teacher” is not a major concern of mine. My fear is that there’s going to be students that I’m going to see struggle, not with school but with outside factors, and that I’m not going to be able to do enough. I know I can be a great teacher to the kids who are good students, and I know I can befriend and develop strong relationships with those students. I’m worried about the students that are going to hate me because they hate school and because they have turmoil in their lives. I just hope I can help those kids and really make a positive influence on their lives.

This feeling of wanting to help these kids stems from all the work we have done with poverty in Beth’s and Grace’s classes. Especially back in high school I used to have a real attitude against these kids. I used to always think they were so stupid for sitting there with their heads on the desk and for not paying attention in class. A lot of times even causing disturbances in the classroom. I now realize what a lot of these kids are going through though and I recognize it’s not their fault. When I think about it now, would I have been the same student if I went home to the electricity being turned off and almost always went to bed hungry? Of course not! I wouldn’t have cared about school either if my own personal needs were not met like so many other kids aren’t. Something that I’m going to do as a teacher is to always have nutritious snacks in my classroom because I never want one of my students to be hungry. First of all, they won’t be able to focus in my class anyways if they’re starving, and second of all I want them to be fed because I couldn’t stand to think of a kid in my class being hungry and unsure of when their next meal is going to be, when I can certainly afford some snacks to help them out and make them feel safer.

In creating my lesson plans, I hope to build activities that get students up and moving around the classroom as much as possible, hopefully really engaging my students. I want to use activities that involve team work and group collaboration to solve a common problem. I really like the idea of using stations and having students move from station to station, with each one presenting a new challenge. I also love the use of primary documents in a history classroom, so I think using several of those could definitely turn into a great station activity. Another teaching strategy that I love is debates because I think they are a great opportunity for students to work on their skills of creating a thesis and backing that thesis (opinion) with supporting evidence. Not that all essays are bad, and essays can be a great form of assessment, but I think debates can be a great way for students to show off their persuasive skills without actually having to write a persuasive essay. Of course I think debates need a lot of ground rules in order to not get out of hand, so those would have to be set at the very beginning of the year.

Another strategy that I want to steal from Mr Long is the use of a rewards system. In his history class Mr Long wanted us to make connections and to ask strong questions. So every time someone in the class made a connection or asked a great question, the whole class would get a point. If your class got to 50 points by the end of the year the whole class got a pizza party. I think this could be a great tool if used effectively because I remember how excited the whole class was every time we got a point and I remember how good it felt when the whole class was excited because of something you did. It really promoted being engaged in the class and I think for some students, having the whole class be happy because of something they did might just be the boost they needed.

So as far as assessment goes, I’m not really a huge fan of tests. If I was to use tests, they would not be in the traditional sense. Rather I might give them a historical event and a current event and ask them to relate the two, to find the similarities and differences, and ask how our understandings of the historical event can help us in understanding the current event and even proposing a solution. I want to test students abilities to use information, I don’t want them to just memorize. Obviously I love debates and I also love group projects and presentations that are open ended allowing students to use their imaginations for the final product. Additionally, I will be using a lot of ungraded assessments to measure where my students are.

I want my classroom climate to be loose and run, but of course centered around learning at the same time. I just remember in Burns and Toohey’s class we always had smiles on our faces, and just because we were learning didn’t mean we never had time to laugh! I think there’s certainly a balance in there between having a super strict classroom where nobody has and fun, and an unstructured classroom where everyone’s having fun but there’s hardly any learning. So there’s a balance that I really hope to find which is why I’m so excited to have Burns and Toohey and my mentor teachers for students teaching this fall (even though I’m not actually supposed to know that yet)! I really hope to learn a lot about classroom climate and about balancing fun and learning from them.

What I hope to contribute to the field of teaching is a fun and positive attitude that is always searching for better, more effective ways of engaging and teaching students. Like Dr Grace always says, as future teachers we are lifelong learners. If we don’t self assess and learn as teachers, we will honestly be terrible teachers. I want to always be looking for new and creative ways to help my students grow not only as learners, but as human beings. I believe I am a natural leader, and I hope to be a leader in whatever school I am in as well. And last but not least, I hope to be a great role model for my students, somebody that they can look up to and depend on.